

A critical assessment of Marxist and neo-Marxist theory of social classes

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Introduction. The classical Marxist theory of social classes

In recent decades, criticisms of the Marxist explanation of social classes have developed so extensively and varied within the social sciences that it seems to have reached the point where, to dismiss this explanation, it is enough to simply invoke its "so many times already demonstrated" retrograde and apocryphal character. Against this stance, in the present chapter, I propose to undertake a critical assessment of the Marxist theory of social classes. To this end, I begin by analyzing what is typically presented as the classical Marxist theory of social classes, and subsequently examine in greater detail the defense and elaboration that the so-called Neo-Marxist theory of social classes has sought to provide for it. Finally, I propose an alternative research program aimed at advancing toward a unitary and coherent theory.

Of all Marx's texts dealing with social classes, it is perhaps the famous *Communist Manifesto* that has been most frequently used as a concise expression of Marx's position on the subject. Therefore, to conduct a critical assessment of Marxist and neo-Marxist theory, it is advisable to begin with a detailed analysis of this foundational text, especially its first chapter.

The *Manifesto* begins with the general observation that throughout human history, society has always been divided into various "classes," "estates," or "rule of social positions," which have an antagonistic relationship with one another (Marx and Engels 2008, p. 41). The imprecision regarding the nature of these various social groups is understandable, beyond the *Manifesto's* synthetic and pamphleteering character, if one considers that the text fundamentally aims to show that capitalist society, lauded by bourgeois ideology as the realm of liberty, equality, and fraternity, is in reality as rife with antagonisms as all its predecessors; that feudal social conflict has simply been supplanted by capitalist social conflict and, as such, has not been eliminated. Nevertheless, the text immediately moves on to specifying the current social conflict as the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. "Our epoch," the *Manifesto* argues, "is characterized by the simplification of class contradictions. Society as a whole is increasingly splitting into two hostile camps, into two great classes directly opposed to one another: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat" (Marx and Engels 2008, p. 42).

This is undoubtedly the strongest thesis upon which the classical Marxist theory of social classes is founded, and for that very reason, the one that has received the most criticism. But before critiquing it, let us examine the arguments presented in this text; that is, let us unfold this thesis in its explanatory unity.

First, the text argues that the existence of the bourgeoisie as a class, and its power to assert itself over all other classes or social structures, arises from a long process of "transformations in the mode of production and exchange" (Marx and Engels 2008, p. 43). In turn, the proletariat, as a product of the bourgeoisie's development, is also presented as the result of this same process of material transformation (Marx and Engels 2008, p. 50). In short, it argues that the existence of modern social classes—that is, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat—and their struggle are the product of the development of the mode of production and exchange. In other words, it is the development of the productive forces and their corresponding social relations of production that determines the existence of social classes and their struggle. Viewed in this light, this presentation completely redefines the *Manifesto's* opening line, "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx and Engels 2008, p. 41). Because now that the "mode of production and exchange" has been discovered as the content of the class struggle, the history of the latter is revealed as merely the form of manifestation of the history of society. Indeed, according to Marxist common sense, it is not the class struggle that constitutes the driving force of history, but only the form in which its development manifests itself.¹

The *Manifesto* then points to the basis for simplifying social conflict into a confrontation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. On the side of the bourgeoisie, we find that its homogenization is brought about by the process of concentration and centralization of capital, to which it is driven through competition. Thus, the "intermediate classes" between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, such as "small industrialists, merchants and rentiers, artisans and peasants, fall into the proletariat either because their small capital is insufficient to undertake large-scale enterprises and succumbs in competition with larger capitalists, or because their skills have been devalued by new methods of production" (Marx and Engels 2008, p. 51). Taken to its extreme, this argument is even presented as suggesting that, in this way, "the bourgeoisie (...) has turned the doctor, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, [and] the scientist into its wage laborers" (Marx and Engels 2008, p. 44). For its part, the proletariat's homogenization is imposed by the transformations in the labor process brought about by the capitalist mode of production. Indeed, with the development of large-scale industry, the worker "becomes

¹ It is striking how the phrase "the class struggle is the driving force of history" has become popularized as one of the most significant quotes from Marx's thought when, strictly speaking, it is not even his own. The phrase comes from a draft of a letter written by Engels, the final original of which has been lost (Marx and Engels 1987, p. 307). Incidentally, the ideas of "ultimate determination" and "relative autonomy," so dear to vulgar Marxism, also belong to Engels. For a sharp critique of these, see Rochabrún (2007, chap. 3).

a mere accessory of the machine, from whom only the simplest and most monotonous manipulation, the easiest to learn, is required" (Marx and Engels 2008, p. 50). Thus, "the interests and living conditions of the proletariat become more and more alike, as machinery gradually obliterates the differences in labor and pushes wages to an equally low level" (Marx and Engels 2008, p. 52).

As we can see, this justification of reducing social conflict to the confrontation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is entirely consistent with the materialist thesis that it is the "transformations in the mode of production and exchange" that determine the existence and configuration of social classes and their struggle. In fact, it is precisely this materialist justification of the class struggle that Marx considers his true contribution to the explanation of social classes. In this regard, he says in a letter written just four years after the publication of the *Manifesto*: "As far as I'm concerned, I do not claim to have discovered the existence of classes in modern society, nor the struggle between them.. Long before me, bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this class struggle, and bourgeois economists the economic anatomy of the classes. What I contributed that was new was to demonstrate (...) that the existence of classes is bound up solely with particular, historical phases in the development of production" (Marx and Engels 1987, p. 55). " (Marx and Engels 1987, p. 55).

Indeed, the explanatory power of the theory presented in the *Manifesto* lies in its ability to link the existence of social classes with a general theory of how social life functions. At the time Marx and Engels wrote the *Manifesto*, the problem was not recognizing the existence of social classes. From Quesnay onward, this existence was generally taken for granted.² The problem lay in explaining why and through what means social classes are constituted. This was the contribution of Marx and Engels in the *Manifesto* and of Marx in the continuation of this project, in the form of the *Contribution of Political Economy*.

Let us now briefly consider the main criticisms that have been made of this explanation and then address the neo-Marxist theory of social classes.

The crisis of classical Marxist theory and the proposed paths to overcome it

Criticisms of classical Marxist class theory initially focused less on the theory's coherence than on its contradiction with concrete phenomena of social differentiation. It

² Quesnay, one of the founders of the Physiocratic school, had been the first to discuss social classes in relation to the economic formation of society. It should also be recalled that Ricardo's theoretical project, the main reference point for political economy at that time, was "the determination of the laws governing the distribution (...) of the product (...) among the three classes of the community, namely: the landowner (...) the owner of capital (...) and the workers" (Ricardo 1985, p. 5). Regarding the naturalness with which the existence of social classes was perceived around 1848, Engels would later recall: "since 1830 (...) conditions had become so simplified that one had to intentionally close one's eyes so as not to see (...) the class struggle" (Engels 1980, p. 15).

so happened that, especially from the late 19th century onward, the development of capitalism did not appear to lead, as Marxist theory predicted, to the homogenization of the proletariat, the homogenization of the bourgeoisie, the elimination of the supposed intermediate classes between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, or, consequently, the simplification of social conflict into a class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. On the contrary, particularly in countries where the capitalist mode of production was supposedly most fully developed, a remarkable process of social differentiation occurred. Social classes seemed to have disappeared.

Since then, classical Marxist theory of social classes has been repeatedly criticized for being simplistic and powerless to account for all concrete social phenomena. For example, Frank Parkin, in his well-known critique of classical Marxist theory of the social sciences, argues: "The most serious weakness of any class model that relegates social collectives to the condition of mere occupants of certain positions, or of embodiments of systemic forces, is that it cannot adequately account for the kinds of complexities that arise when racial, religious, ethnic, and sexual divisions occur tangentially to formal class divisions" (Parkin 1984, p. 17).

Marxist responses to this type of criticism have essentially followed three paths. The first has consisted of clinging to classical Marxist theory and attempting to empirically demonstrate the trends it predicted. This is the case of Braverman, who has sought to support, through the analysis of various labor processes, the "degradation" of the working class and the increasing proletarianization, via its own degradation, of the "new middle class" characteristic of the era of "monopoly capital" (Braverman 1975, pp. 467-469). A second path has consisted of abandoning classical Marxist theory to pave the way for a theory that, while remaining within a critical stance toward modern society, could account for the new complexities of the social structure. This is the case, to take a modern example, of Laclau and Mouffe, who present a critique of classical Marxist theory of social classes for its inability to grasp the "plural and multifaceted character" of "contemporary social struggles" (Laclau and Mouffe 2010, p. 26), and propose instead a "post-Marxist" theory of social conflict based on the concepts of "hegemony" and "radical democracy" (Laclau and Mouffe 2010, pp. 25-29). Between these two paths lies the so-called neo-Marxist theory of social classes, which, while acknowledging the complexity of modern social structure, seeks to construct an explanation of it that is consistent with classical Marxist theory. We will analyze this proposal in detail because it appears to be the most genuine response that Marxism can offer to the processes of social differentiation that have occurred since its inception as a social theory. To do so, we will draw on the work of Erik Olin Wright.

The neo-Marxist theory of social classes

Wright's defense

In order to "defend" classical Marxist theory of social classes from the criticisms raised by the "problem of the middle classes" and "non-proletarian employment", Wright sets himself the objective of "constructing, within a broad Marxist theoretical framework, a concept of class structure that can be used in micro-process analysis at a relatively low level of abstraction" (Wright 1992, p. 21).

The theoretical framework offered by this author begins with the concept of a "contradictory class position." According to Wright, "most concepts of class structure are constructed upon the tacit premise that there is a one-to-one correspondence between positions in the class structure (the places occupied by human individuals) and classes themselves: each position belongs to one and only one class" (Wright 1992, p. 60). In contrast to this approach, the author posits that "some positions in the class structure could belong to two or more classes simultaneously" (Wright 1992, p. 60). To conceptually address this possibility, Wright reframes the concept of class as a "relational" concept, wherein the social relationship that constitutes classes becomes the link connecting a set of concrete social practices. Thus, within a single concrete position, an individual may engage in practices corresponding to various social classes. For instance, if one views "the capital-labor relationship as a bundle of relational practices, managers would occupy the bourgeois position within one aspect or dimension of these practices"—by dominating workers—"and the proletarian position within another"—by selling their labor power—(Wright 1992, p. 61). In short, this constitutes a "contradictory position within class relations" (Wright 1992, p. 60)—a dual class position that combines, in this particular case, two distinct classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Having finished presenting this concept, the author notes that it is still insufficient to meet the stated objective. In particular, he finds a series of problems in the confusion generated by the concepts of domination and exploitation, in the inability to coherently introduce the issue of state employment, and, finally, in the practical difficulty of operationalizing the categories involved (Wright 1992, pp. 64-65).

Wright's proposed construction thus requires a reworking of the concept of "contradictory positions." To do this, he revisits the concepts of "economic formation of society" and "mode of production" articulated by the Althusserian school. What he finds, then, is that within the "various modes of production" that this school conceives "within a given society," there are differences, just as there are between "pure modes of production," between "the type of productive resource whose unequal ownership (or control) enables the exploiting class to appropriate part of the socially produced surplus" (Wright 1992, p. 65). On this basis, he concludes that "this opens up the possibility that certain positions in the class structure are simultaneously exploited through one

mechanism of exploitation but are exploitative through another mechanism" (Wright 1992, p. 66). For example, according to this approach, managers would be "capitalistically exploited" but, at the same time, would be "organizational exploiters" considered from the perspective of state exploitation. He calls this variant of "contradictory class positions" "multiple exploitations."

At this juncture, Wright once again finds the explanation reached to be insufficient. First, he finds that the credentials on which, under this new conceptual development, the character of the exploitative relationship is determined "turn out to be a relatively ambiguous basis for defining a class relationship" (Wright 1992, p. 71). Secondly, it is difficult to explain why managers, despite being exploited by capitalists, do not seek to transform society, at least in a society where the type of exploitation they carry out prevails. To explain this passivity of managers, Wright argues, one would have to appeal to the "concept of hegemony," however, it seems like a "special supplicatory argument" (Wright 1992, p. 72). Third, the author finds that this new conceptual development conflates the manager-bureaucrats of state-owned corporations with capitalists, grouping them together as occupying the same class positions (Wright 1992, p. 73); that is to say, the problem of state employment persists. Finally, the author again faces the problem of operationalizing the categories, which now appears simply "displaced to the categories of qualifications and credentials," equally "difficult to operationalize in a consistent and theoretically meaningful way" (Wright 1992, p. 74).

To overcome these problems, Wright proposes to develop this conceptual construct by "complexifying" the established concept of class structure. This development involves adding three "new complexities." The first consists of incorporating the possibility of multiple positions within the class structure. Until then, and as previously discussed, it was assumed that individuals occupied one and only one position in the class structure; that is, they essentially had only one job. Now, however, he acknowledges the fact that an individual may have more than one job and, even more significantly, that some individuals may own property that allows them to earn income. "These types of situations," the author concludes, "define a specific type of complexity in the class structure, since certain individuals can occupy different positions within the class structure depending on their jobs and their investments" (Wright 1992, p. 91). The second complexity lies in acknowledging "that class interests are conditioned by social relations apart from their direct relationship to the production process" (Wright 1992, p. 91). This involves assuming the existence of what Wright himself calls "mediated class positions." The most telling example is the influence of kinship networks and family structures on the interests of individuals, regardless of their class affiliation. Finally, Wright adds the question of temporality to the analysis of positions within the class structure. By introducing the temporal dimension, Wright seeks to take into account "class careers," that is, where an individual comes from and where they are going. For

example, "two individuals with identical working-class jobs in terms of statically defined relational characteristics will have very different material interests if one of them is certain of rising to a managerial position and the other knows that he will remain for life in a working-class position" (Wright 1992, p. 97).

With these "new conceptual elements," Wright finally concludes the construction he offers to "defend and deepen" the classical Marxist theory of social classes. However, when he sets out to consider the "problem of the middle class" on this basis, he encounters difficulties. For example, in the case of "experts and professionals," he concludes that there are "objectively ambiguous class positions" and that his arguments are insufficient to "adequately capture the overall position [of experts and professionals] in the class structure" (Wright 1992, pp. 106–107), to the point that he seems to hesitate to return to his earlier analyses since, at the very least, they "corresponded more closely to the underlying intuitions of many people about the class position of experts and professionals than the argument based strictly on material interests" (Wright 1992, p. 108). The same thing happens to him in the consideration of "managers", where he ends up presenting as equally valid for his analysis both the use of the original concept of "contradictory positions" and that of "organizational exploitation" (1992, p. 110).

Faced with this situation, it is not surprising that the author himself considers that he has not "managed to create such a neat and coherent conceptual space," that "in one way or another (...) arbitrary elements have crept into the analysis" (Wright 1992, p. 29), and that he has decided to resign himself to "simply living with a certain level of conceptual incoherence," to have "a tolerance for a certain degree of conceptual ambiguity and inconsistency," and to "adopt a certain pragmatic attitude toward research" (Wright 1992, p. 77). Even less surprising is that his decision to adopt Marxist theory is reduced to "a personal commitment" to "emancipatory change" and the "ambition" that concrete class conflicts might one day be "systematically linked" to the macrosocial changes that this theory would explain (Wright 1992, p. 84).

The limitations of the neo-Marxist theoretical approach and the path opened by the critique of political economy

As we can see, the path proposed by neo-Marxist theory to "defend" and "deepen" the classical Marxist theory of social classes does not lead to conclusive results, nor does it even manage to produce provisional but consistent results. Rather, it seems that this path only leads neo-Marxist theory to constantly clash with its own impotence in constructing a unified and coherent theory of social classes. Why does neo-Marxist theory fail? Perhaps the main obstacle lies in the methodological strategy that guides its theoretical project. Let us summarize this strategy.

Faced with a specific situation that seems to contradict the general Marxist explanation of social classes, neo-Marxist theory begins by constructing a new, supposedly Marxist concept to represent that situation and then seeks to systematically link it to Marxist theory. This task, however, entails modifying the basic concepts of Marxist theory. Neo-Marxist theory then progresses to the point where the conceptual modification becomes so extensive that it ends up calling into question the entirety of Marxist theory. For example, when confronted with the "manager," neo-Marxist theory constructs the concept of "contradictory class position," which immediately represents the dual role the manager seems to occupy within the Marxist framework. Subsequently, since this concept contradicts the very concept of social class, neo-Marxist theory reworks the concept of class as a "relational" concept, which theoretically admits the possibility of a "contradictory class position." It is then noted that the newly constructed concept also clashes with the role of the concept of "exploitation" in the definition of class, but modifying it would imply questioning the essence of Marxist theory. Another example can be seen in the construction of the concept of "multiple exploitations," where the concepts of "mode of production" and "economic formation of society" are reworked from this starting point, but the construction is halted when it becomes necessary to move forward, once again, on the definition of class relations or on the question of the determination of consciousness, by introducing the concept of hegemony, for example; that is, it stops when it would be necessary to advance in an overly general reformulation of the theory.

In essence, this methodological strategy is based on seeking a correspondence between general Marxist theory and a new conceptual construct developed on the basis of empirical observation. Leaving aside the problem of how new concepts are derived from empirical observation,³ the main weakness of this methodological strategy is that the relationship between the general theory and the new conceptual construction is presented, from the very beginning of the research, as a completely external relationship. That is, neither do new concepts arise from the development of the general theory itself, nor does the general theory arise from the analytical discovery of the general determinants of those concepts. It is this initial deficiency that causes the conceptual edifice of neo-Marxist theory to collapse permanently.

In contrast to this exteriority, the key to the methodological strategy of Marxian critique lies in the unfolding of the immanent necessity of the determinations of the object under examination.⁴ Specifically, it is about "the reproduction of the concrete" rising from the "abstract to the concrete" (Marx 1997b, pp. 21-22), that is, the unfolding

³ At this point, Neo-Marxist theory does not appear to differ from the standard scientific method. For a substantive critique of this method, and in particular regarding the construction of concepts or categories, see Iñigo Carrera (2008) and Starosta (2008).

⁴ In recent years, this conception of the Marxian method has gained ground within the specialized literature, particularly through the approach commonly referred to as the "New Dialectic." See Kincaid (2009).

of the determinations of the concrete that one seeks to explain, starting from its simplest and showing how these necessarily develop by themselves in increasingly concrete forms, until reaching empirical reality. Consequently, if the aim is to assess the explanatory potential of Marx's theory of social classes regarding concrete situations of contemporary social differentiation, the path suggested by Marx's own approach is, rather, to continue developing this critique of political economy until it encompasses the specific situations one seeks to explain. Given the level of development already attained by Marxian critique, the task ahead may appear extremely arduous and overwhelming; however, I believe it represents the only solid and coherent path for addressing the problems surrounding the concrete determination of social classes. The following section presents several examples of this research program, set in counterpoint to the theoretical construction of Neo-Marxist theory.

A research program based on the critique of political economy

The alienation of the dominant social relation in the commodity

The main result of commodity analysis is that "the relation [between] men as commodity owners [is] the dominant social relation" (Marx 1999, p. 74). Let us briefly examine the meaning of this result and its implications for the analysis of social classes.

For the critique of political economy, labor is the process by which man "mediates, regulates, and controls his metabolism with nature" (Marx 1999, p. 215); it is, therefore, the basis of the development of human life. The starting point of every society is, consequently, the organization of the various individual labors that make up the overall social labor. The basic social relation through which this organization is established is what constitutes the "dominant social relation," upon which all other social relations are structured, and whose specificity distinguishes one society from another (Marx 1997a, pp. 4–5).

Throughout most of human history, the dominant social relation has taken the form of direct relations of personal dependence (Marx 1997b, p. 85). The organization of social production is thus carried out through the direct imposition, from one individual to another, of the labor necessary for the reproduction of social life. In contrast, what immediately becomes apparent when analyzing capitalist society is the absence of such direct relations in shaping the organization of overall social labor. Instead, what we find is the market, that is, the link between commodities. In this society, individuals confront each other as producers performing "private, autonomous, and mutually independent labors" (Marx 1999, p. 52); that is, they confront each other primarily as individuals who have no power to interfere in the portion of overall social labor performed by the other. Therefore, the only social relationship they can have to organize the portion of global social work that corresponds to each of them is only *post festum* and, therefore, only

through the exchange of their own products. The mercantile relationship thus becomes the dominant social relationship.⁵

This alienation of the capacity to organize social labor into the product of one's own labor determines a crucial difference between the individual in capitalist society and that of any other past society. Prior to capitalism, the social role that each individual played in the production of social life was an inseparable attribute of their person, precisely because it was determined by their personal relationship with another individual in their society. The serf, for example, was a serf within the personal bonds that constituted the life of the fiefdom and could only cease to be one by changing those very bonds or by escaping from the community. In capitalism, on the contrary, the individual establishes their primary link with society not as a person, but as a mere personification of the commodity, or, as Marx puts it, "here, people exist for one another only as representatives of commodities... as personifications [of them]" (Marx 1999, p. 104). Thus, by alienating their capacity to relate productively with the rest of society through commodities, their own social role becomes externally determined. For their social role to change, it is now sufficient for the type of commodity that links them to society to change.

Any further specification of the various social roles occupied in capitalism cannot alter this basic determination. Insofar as class status is a specification of the social role played by an individual, it can only arise from the type of commodity embodied; that is to say, it can only be a developed form of its embodiment. It is therefore impossible for the same individual to belong to two different social classes—that is, to fulfill two different social roles—if their connection to society is based on the embodiment of a single commodity. Conversely, an individual who embodies two different commodities necessarily fulfills two different social roles, and if these commodities entail membership in a social class, then this individual belongs to two different social classes.

This is not the place to delve into the complexities of determining social class membership, a topic that arises here. We simply wish to point out that the starting point for analyzing this determination appears at the very beginning of the critique of political economy—in the discovery of the commodity as the dominant social relation—and that if we wish to address it in all its complexity, we must do so on this basis.

⁵ The development of commodity relations is often considered a trend characteristic of modern society (see, for example, Polanyi 2007). However, the meaning given here to the constitution of the commodity as the "dominant social relation" is much deeper: it signifies not only the widespread existence of commodity relations, but also that even those relations that are manifestly not commodity relations—such as so-called pre-capitalist relations, but also relations of friendship or family—are in reality necessary concrete forms for the development of commodity relations themselves.

The determination of labor power as a commodity

The analysis of the commodity as the dominant social relation shows that it can only constitute itself as such when it is a product of capital. But then it becomes clear that what we have before us as the dominant social relation is no longer the commodity, but capital. The explanation of the movement of capital as the dominant social relation leads immediately to the analysis of the commodity labor power. Let us briefly examine this analysis.

The first thing we have is that “the value of labor-power, like that of every other commodity, is determined by the labor-time necessary for the production, and therefore also for the reproduction, of that specific article” (Marx 1999, p. 207). But the fact that labor-power is embodied in an individual gives this production and reproduction distinctive characteristics. Because “the owner of labor-power” is a “mortal” individual, says Marx, “it will be necessary to constantly replace with at least an equal number of new labor-powers those that are withdrawn from the market by wear and tear and death. The sum of the means of subsistence necessary for the production of labor-power thus includes the means of subsistence of the substitutes, that is, the children of the workers” (Marx 1999, pp. 208-209). This means that the reproduction of the worker presupposes the reproduction of the worker’s family, of their children, and therefore of their spouse.

We see, then, that the normal reproduction of labor power involves the training, reproduction, and labor of other individuals who are not the immediate bearers of that labor power. These other individuals are linked to society through their connection with the worker, whose reproduction of labor power they are responsible for sustaining. As participants in the production of labor power, they are also personifications of that commodity. It is in this way that, for example, the worker's partner is also a full member of the working class. If a member of the capitalist class were the partner of a member of the working class and, in this way, participated in the production of their labor power, we would not be dealing with a member of the capitalist class who is simultaneously a member of the working class or who has a mediated or contradictory class relationship; we would be dealing with an individual who, as we have seen in the analysis of the commodity as the dominant social relation, simply belongs to two different classes because they are responsible for the personification of two different commodities. If, to continue with this example, this individual then acts with a “typically working-class” consciousness, they act in this way because it is what is appropriate for them as the personification of the commodity labor power. Conversely, if the reproduction of their partner's labor power includes their participation with this type of consciousness, and this individual refuses to act with that consciousness, their partner will not be able to reproduce their labor power normally, just as would happen if they themselves refused to act with the consciousness corresponding to their social condition.

The complexity of determining class membership that emerges at this point in the critique of political economy is simply a continuation of the complexity revealed in the analysis of the commodity as the dominant social relation. Again, my aim here is not to provide a definitive account of the determination at play in this stage of the critique of political economy, but merely to present the possibility and potential of such an analysis.

The differentiation of the workforce generated by the development of relative surplus value

Since the key to the production of surplus value lies in the difference between the value of labor power and the amount of labor it can exert, in order to advance in the production of surplus value, capital must reduce the value of labor power. This reduction thus implies the development of labor's productive forces and, consequently, not only the formal subordination of labor to capital, but its real subordination—that is, the real transformation of the conditions of labor by capital.

Of all the transformations involved in the development of the real subsumption of labor under capital, I am interested here in focusing on the one corresponding to the differentiation of labor power. “With the development of the real subsumption of labor under capital,” says Marx, “it is not the individual worker but increasingly a socially combined capacity for labor that becomes the real agent of the labor process as a whole, and since the various capacities for labor that cooperate and form the total productive machine participate very differently in the immediate process of commodity or, better here, product formation—this one works more with his hands, that one more with his head, one as a manager, engineer, technician, etc., another as an overseer, yet another as a direct manual worker or even as a mere laborer—more and more functions of the capacity for labor are included in the immediate concept of productive labor, and its agents in the concept of productive workers directly exploited by capital and generally subordinated to its valorization and production process” (Marx 2000b, pp. 78-79).

What we have here is that the revolution of the productive forces, which drives capital accumulation, implies the development of a labor process in which workers whose labor power differs enormously participate in a coordinated manner. The various functions that workers perform in the production process do not differentiate them except as organs of the "collective worker" that they comprise. All these workers belong to the working class, first and foremost, because they are sellers of labor power. Any differentiation that subsequently arises from the role they play in the production process cannot change this original determination, nor can the wage differences that result from these functions. For example, the fact that one worker is responsible for coercively imposing on another the way in which he must work does not change his status as a worker, precisely because it is as necessary a function of the collective labor process as the one performed by the coerced worker.

Clearly, the development of the differentiation of labor power implies an increasing differentiation in the types of consumption each worker must undertake to reproduce their own labor power. The differentiation of labor power within the production process is thus reflected in its differentiation outside of that process, that is, at the moment when labor power produces itself. And if the production of labor power is differentiated, so too is its sale. Workers who sell different types of labor power are therefore not compelled to transform their competitive relationship into a relationship of solidarity as a condition for selling their labor power. Hence, they do not need to develop class consciousness or may even deny it.⁶

This differentiation of labor power would seem to contradict the thesis of the homogenization of the working class that emerges from the classical Marxist theory of social classes, founded on the *Communist Manifesto*. However, the analysis of the critique of political economy progresses, showing that the fullest form of the development of the productive forces in capitalism consists in the transformation of the essence of the labor process and, therefore, of the differentiation of labor power that this entails. With the full development of the machine system, Marx argues, “the worker no longer introduces the modified natural object, as an intermediary link, between the thing and himself, but inserts the natural process, which he transforms into an industrial one, as a means between himself and inorganic nature, which he dominates” (Marx 1997c, p. 228). Labor power then needs to be produced exclusively as “supervisory and regulatory with respect to the production process itself” (Marx 1997c). The tendency towards homogenization of the productive attributes of the working class, initially motivated solely by the need for fluidity in the movement of capital from one branch to another (Marx 2000b, pp. 46-47), is now emerging as a necessity of the production process itself.

As in the two previous cases, this brief presentation does not intend to exhaust all the questions that arise at this point regarding the determination of social classes. It simply aims to show that this moment in the development of the critique of political economy is another pivotal point for understanding the complexity of social class determination.

Conclusion

We have seen that the potential of classical Marxist theory's explanation of social classes lies in linking their existence to the material organization of social life. The course of historical development in capitalist society, especially that which occurred from the late 19th century onward, generated a process of social differentiation of such magnitude that any determination related to social classes seems to have been erased. For those who intend to continue Marx's theoretical project, the current challenge is not to link social

⁶ In addition to Iñigo Carrera (2008, pp. 19-20 and 55-93), this interpretation can also be found in Starosta (2012).

classes to their material determination, but rather to link the concrete phenomena of social differentiation to the existence of these classes. We have seen that the neo-Marxist theoretical project of advancing in this direction openly fails, and that the cause of this failure lies in its methodological strategy, which externally relates the concrete phenomena it confronts to the general determinations discovered by Marx. In contrast to this type of approach, this chapter proposes to establish this link through the development of the *critique of political economy*, the true foundation of Marxist class theory. A development in this direction implies, in addition to recognizing the general determinations already identified by Marx, the full unfolding of the determinations pertaining to the question of social classes at every stage of the *critique of political economy*.⁷ It also implies, of course, the continuation of this critique itself, extending it beyond its current scope. The explanatory potential of a theory of social classes, built upon the proposed methodological strategy, can only be assessed through a much deeper and more detailed development that far exceeds the scope of this work, in which we limit ourselves to developing a few specific examples of this possible research program. In this sense, this chapter merely constitutes a starting point.

⁷ I have presented a first approach to the deployment of the determinations of social classes in chapter 8 of *Capital*, in Caligaris (2012).